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CAFTA

Global market won't be deterred

If hitching a ride on populism, politicians latched on to NAFTA to stir American workers' fears and resentments, look out: CAFTA promises even more hot air.

The North American Free Trade Agreement, crafted during the Clinton administration, was a realistic acknowledgement of the inevitable, that we live in a global market.

CAFTA, for all the castigation it can expect, is actually a smaller pact. The Central American Free Trade Agreement only includes six Latin American countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. But it's a continuation on the theme.

As both recognize: Goods and services are global today with ease in communications, transportation and worker mobility. The T-shirt you buy could be made in Mexico as in the next county; the car could be from Canada or Canton.

But NAFTA has been blamed for a lot of sins. Just as it opened up trade between countries without restrictions, it also resulted in the loss of U.S. jobs across borders.

Gov. Haley Barbour hammered this in 2003 running against former Gov. Ronnie Musgrove, saying: "These bad trade deals have been devastating to Mississippi . . ." despite the fact that when Barbour was chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1994, he praised Clinton for NAFTA, calling it "one of the real bright lights of his first year."

In fact, NAFTA was only the first acknowledgement of the handwriting on the wall for globalization, and CAFTA could help Mississippi, eliminating tariffs on farm goods sold to the region and possibly boosting the coast's ports.

It's also another reason why education should be the state's priority, so that our young people can compete.

The greater issue is not "if" there will be global trade, but what U.S. politicians will do to support the American middle class, with more education, training, tax credits for small business, and support for business innovation.

Maintaining trade barriers will not promote American business, by dwindling markets. Investing in human capital, from early childhood education to college, is the way for Mississippi to compete in the emerging global marketplace.